

Comments on Firefighters Contract

Posted by **Pierluigi Oliverio** on Monday, March 28, 2011



San Jose's Fire Station 6 was put on the chopping block in 2008.

Last week the council took up the firefighters union contract with more than 100 firefighters in attendance. I thought I would share why I voted no.

First, I think it is clear that if you have worked in city government over the years that things are drastically changing due to structural budget deficits. Second, if you are new to working in city government, you will most likely not have the same career as those before you.

I remember when I was a candidate for city council and meeting with the fire union. We covered a variety of topics but I always remember this question: "How would you help us with city management on wage and benefit negotiations." I recall saying that I would attend the union negotiations myself. They were quite happy and said that was a great response. However, the firefighters union did not inform me then of the reality that labor negotiations are not open to council members.

I appreciated the 10 percent concession and was surprised that it did not go through binding arbitration. I believe the new interim president of the union is a sincere person.

Even with the 10 percent and after vacancies and retirements, we will still lay off more than 30 firefighters. However, the larger item which remains is minimum staffing for fire engines. I have brought up the

minimum staffing issue in council meetings, committee meetings and budget meetings.

The LAFCO report on all Santa Clara County fire departments shows that San Jose is the only city in the county that has four firefighters on an engine. Also looking at the same report it shows we have an over 25-to-1 ratio in calls for medical vs. fire.

I believe we should lower the amount of medical calls when council approves the ambulance contract with the County. County government, by state law, controls the ambulance contracts. We should stop having our fire fighters respond to calls that are not necessary, like those at the county jail, since they already have medical personnel at the jail. In addition, low priority alpha and bravo medical calls should be left to ambulances.

Other cities as mentioned above are able to make do with three on an engine. We may want four on an engine and we may even want five, but we cannot afford it. This does not mean every engine would have three instead of four, as not all stations are equally busy, and therefore it provides the flexibility to keep stations open. Residents are not so concerned if there are three or four on a engine, but they do care if the station is open or closed.

Because of minimum staffing requirements in the recently accepted fire contract and the unavoidable layoffs, we would close fire stations.

Back in 2008, when Station 6 was a line item to be sold in the city budget with zero notification to residents, I initiated the policy passed by the Council that mandates mailed notification to residents and two evening public meetings with the presentation of data for the primary service area when fire stations are proposed to be closed. Most importantly, it does not allow a station closure to be included in the budget prior to the prescribed outreach. Before this policy fire stations could be sold/closed with no notice.

So like the Communications Hill neighborhood, which now has a closed fire station, other fire stations somewhere in San Jose will need to be closed due to minimum staffing. It is unfair to residents that we close stations when they can remain open with one less person to maintain response times based on distance.

If the council does not want to see fire engines taken out of service than we will need to makes cuts elsewhere. The most likely place for those cuts will be our police department, with the laying off of police officers.

We do not have a minimum staffing requirement applied to police cars for police officers. If police run short on a shift they do not say "let's

stop patrolling in Almaden or Berryessa.” We do not have minimum staffing for our libraries. We do not have minimum staffing for our planning department to process an application for development. This comes down to what is most important for San Jose in 2011 with the limited taxpayer dollars that are available to allocate. For me the answer is simple. It is police. Police enforce the social contract. No one else does.

The social contract allows individuals to be free from harm and intimidation.

The social contract allows the weak to be protected.

We cannot do everything. In fact we can’t even do both...police or fire. So we have to choose.

This fire union contract makes the fire department the number-one priority in the city budget by maintaining minimum staffing on fire engines. I cannot say this is my number-one priority nor my residents’ number-one priority when we provide multiple services to residents. With that said, I vote against funding charities even when they are great organizations; they are not in the city charter. In addition to voting against the Hayes Mansion, golf courses, million dollar IT projects gone wrong or championing \$1.475 million in cost avoidance on a current IT project. I voted against \$1.3 million on golf nets, rezoning industrial land to residential, affordable housing that does not pay property tax. And I support outsourcing of services like janitorial to save money for core services.

I think it is wrong for myself as an elected official to make promises to every group or specific union when the reality is restricted resources do not allow promises to be kept.

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